

# THE FLOOD AND THE FURY

**H**urricane Katrina is now a category-five storm with wind gusts up to one hundred seventy-five miles an hour — and it's heading directly toward us," the weatherman warned grimly. "It's expected to hit the Biloxi area in the early morning hours tomorrow with devastating force. Widespread flooding and catastrophic damage are expected."

A hush fell over the four adults and nine children who were watching television in the cramped living room of the small A-frame house in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Biloxi, Mississippi. Lying on the floor, 13-year-old Peter Ballard, who was using his yellow Labrador retriever, Duke, as a pillow, put down the superhero comic book he was reading and stared at the TV.

"The storm surge — the onshore rush of seawater caused by Katrina's high winds — could rise as much as twenty to thirty feet," the weatherman said. "Officials urge everyone living in low-lying areas to evacuate immediately."

Peter and the others in the house — all relatives of his — planned to ride out the storm together here in the home of his grandmother, Lenore Pitts. Seeing the worried look on the faces of the others in the room, Peter declared, "I'm not worried, Grandma. I think this is going to be just like Hurricane Ivan — no big deal."

Ivan had slammed into the area the year before, in 2004. Forecasters had predicted that it would cause considerable destruction in his hometown, but the hurricane packed less of a punch than predicted, and Biloxi escaped major damage.

"I agree with you, Peter," Grandma said. "I'm staying right here."

Outside in the darkness, the howling wind and pelting rain lashed against the windows and pounded the tin roof, making it hard to hear the TV weatherman. Peter ignored him and returned to his stack of comic books to pass the time.

Across the room, his twin sister, Prissy, was nervously twisting her braided hair. "Why is it that all the bad storms come at night?" she whimpered. "It's scary."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Peter said. "It will be over by morning."

The room was hot, sticky, and crowded. Pressed together on the couch were his mother, Venus, his 16-year-old sister, Tamara, Grandma, and Aunt Amelia. His 20-year-old sister, Yolanda, sat in a chair holding her infant son. Peter's five-year-old brother, Sam, was playing Candyland with his four cousins, ages two through seven, in the corner of the room.

Suddenly, the front door opened, and a burst of wind-swept rain blew into the house. Peter's 23-year-old brother, Jerome,

scurried inside. His shirt, jeans, and baseball cap were sopping wet. "You need to leave here for a shelter right now," he announced. "The storm is turning into a monster."

"Maybe you're right," Peter's mother said. "I think we should get out of here and go to higher ground farther inland, out in the country."

"Momma, we'll be fine here," said Peter. "We rode out Ivan, and we didn't have any problems. Why should this be any different?"

"I agree with Peter," Grandma said. "This house of mine has stood here for over thirty years and gone through many storms before. The cement blocks under here will keep us high and dry."

"But, Grandma, they say this could be the baddest one of all," Jerome warned. "All of you, come with me, please. There's a shelter at the homeless mission about six blocks from here. You'll be safer there because it's on higher ground. I can make a couple of trips in my car so that everyone can get to the shelter."

"I don't want to be stuck in a crowded shelter with strangers," Peter argued. The adults, except for his mother, nodded in agreement.

"Y'all are free to go," Grandma said to the others, "but we're better off here than out in that wind and rain."

Jerome pleaded with the adults, but finally gave up in frustration. Even his mother decided to stay. Bending down, Jerome looked directly into Peter's eyes and whispered, "Look around you, Peter. You see small children, old ladies, and women who panic easily, except for maybe Tamara. Do you really think they can take care of themselves in an emergency? When this place blows down or gets flooded — and one or the other will

happen — guess who's going to have to take charge? I'm telling you, before this storm is over, you'll be in a tighter spot than any of those superheroes you read about in your comic books."

"We're staying," Peter insisted. "We'll be fine."

Peter couldn't have been more wrong. Jerome couldn't have been more right.

Shortly after Jerome left, the power went out, causing Prissy to let out a shriek, which frightened the younger ones.

"We might as well turn in for the night," said Grandma. "Not much else we can do in the dark." She pulled out a flashlight and helped get everyone situated.

The house had only one bedroom, so Amelia, Yolanda, Tamara, and the children slept on chairs, rugs, and the couch in the living room. With his dog, Duke, Peter sprawled out on a blanket on the floor at the foot of a bed that was shared by his mother, Grandmother, and Prissy. *Nothing to worry about*, Peter thought before falling into a deep slumber.

Shortly before dawn, his mother shook Peter. "Peter, wake up! Water is coming into the house!"

Once the grogginess cleared his head, he realized that the blanket he was sleeping on was soaked. His mother shined a flashlight on the floor, revealing about an inch of water. Duke was pacing and panting nervously.

"Peter, I was afraid you were going to drown in your sleep," his mother said. He could hardly hear her over the deafening roar of the wind. From the loud banging overhead, he knew that fierce gusts were peeling back part of the tin roof.

*Katrina sounds a lot worse than Ivan*, he thought. *A lot worse.*

Peter took the flashlight and aimed it out the window. *Uh-oh, it definitely is worse.* Floodwater had nearly swallowed up the family car; only its roof was visible. Feeling a strange sensation in his bare feet, he looked down and saw water seeping up between the floorboards. *This is getting bad.* For the first time since the storm struck, Peter was worried.

Meanwhile, Yolanda and Tamara were waking up the children, hustling them into the kitchen, and putting them on the counter to stay dry.

Back in the bedroom, Peter's mother shouted to Grandma, who was stirring awake. "Momma, the roof is tearing off the house, and water is coming up through the floor! We've got to get out of here!"

"Oh, girl, lie down and go back to sleep," Grandma, still half asleep, mumbled.

Peter shook her and said, "Grandma, Momma is right. You have to get up. It's not safe here anymore."

His mother turned to Peter and wailed, "What are we going to do?"

The deafening noise from the screaming wind, rattling roof, and whimpering children made it hard for him to concentrate. *Stop, stop!* he thought. *I wish it would all stop!* He cupped his hands over his ears. *Think of something. They're all counting on me.*

Meanwhile, Tamara grabbed the phone and exclaimed, "It's still working!"

"Call nine-one-one," Peter said.

She did and then blurted into the phone, "Help us! There are nine children and four adults here at two zero zero three

Dogwood Avenue, and we're trapped. Water is coming up so fast we can't get out. Send help! Hurry!"

Her look of distress turned to alarm as she hung up the phone. "They said there isn't anyone who can help us. It's too dangerous. They said we're on our own. Now what will we do?"

"There isn't anything we can do except stay where we are," Grandma replied.

The house was rocking and creaking from the howling and ever-strengthening wind and rising storm surge. Water from the damaged roof was dripping steadily from various spots in the ceiling.

Peter shined the flashlight out the window. The street had turned into a raging white-capped river. Looking about 100 feet past the submerged car, he saw that the house of the next-door neighbors, the Wilsons, was on higher ground. Although only one story tall, the house was made of cement block, so Peter figured it would likely withstand Katrina's wrath. His grandmother's house was an older, wooden A-frame.

"Momma, we need to get to the Wilsons," Peter said.

"But that means we have to swim in that flood." She shook her head. "We'll all drown."

"We have no choice," he declared. "We can't stay here. The flood is getting higher. I don't know how long we have before the house gets knocked off its foundation."

After ushering everyone into the kitchen, Peter asked, "Who knows how to swim?" He raised his hand. No one else did, although Tamara raised hers halfway and said, "I *sorta* know how to float."

Hearing the question, Prissy murmured "Oh, no, oh, no." She began to cry, triggering tears in the smaller children.

"We'll just hold on to each other real tight and wade in the water over to the Wilson's," said Peter. "At least the current of the flood is heading in the right direction."

The adults protested. "Let's wait a little while longer," Grandma suggested. "The storm should be easing up soon."

It didn't. As daylight came, Katrina intensified, and the storm surge kept rising until it was about six inches above the windowsills. Water was seeping through the cracks and outlets in the wall. Worse yet, the house began to tilt.

"We can't wait any longer," said Peter. "The house will be swept away any moment. We need to get everybody out now!"

The water in the house was above the knees of the adults. Chairs and tables were beginning to float around the living room. Duke could barely keep his head above the surface.

"Our babies! Our babies!" Peter's mother wailed. "What's going to happen to them?"

It was time for Peter to take charge of their escape.

"Yolanda, make sure the little ones stay put on the kitchen counter," he said. "Tamara, gather up all the sheets. We'll rip them into strips and make a rope out of them. Then we'll walk out of here all tied together so no one will slip away."

After they prepared the sheet-rope, they wrapped it around one another. But the pressure from the storm surge made it impossible to open the front door. "How will we get out of here?" asked Aunt Amelia.

After they untied themselves, Peter ordered everyone into

the kitchen and off the floor. Then he picked up a chair and smashed the double-wide window in the living room. Brackish, smelly water gushed in, knocking Peter down, upending furniture, and shoving Duke into the kitchen where the others were bawling. When the water level inside the house was even with the storm surge outside, Peter broke off the jagged edges of the window so it would be safer to exit.

They tied themselves together again. Yolanda, the tallest of the group, held her baby and stepped out into the surging water. "The current is too strong!" she yelled. "Pull me back!" The others yanked her into the house.

"We're going to die!" Prissy sobbed. "I know it. We're all going to die!"

"Not if I can help it," Peter retorted. "Now shut up!"

"Peter," said Tamara. "Do you think we can each take one kid at a time and swim over to the Wilsons' house?"

"Better let me do it," he replied. "No offense, but you swim like a rock."

Before moving the children, Peter decided to take Yolanda over first so she could watch after them when he brought them to the Wilsons'. He tied the sheet-ropes around Yolanda and himself and told her, "Hold my hand. We're going to let the current push us to the Wilsons'."

"I'll try to be brave," she stammered.

They crawled out the window and were swiftly carried by the storm surge toward the Wilsons'. Paddling by Peter's side was Duke, who had slipped out the open window so he could remain by his master.

When they reached the Wilsons' front porch, Peter grabbed

the railing and pulled himself and his sister onto the stoop. The Wilsons weren't home, so Peter and Yolanda kicked in the front door.

Then Peter swam back toward his grandmother's house. But fighting the swift current wasn't easy. Tall and lanky for his age, the boy was glad that he had been working out with weights at his middle school, because he needed all the arm strength he had built up. Duke huffed but managed to keep pace with him during his return.

Inside Grandma's house, Peter cradled the youngest child in one arm and went out the window. Using a sidestroke, he swam to the Wilsons' and handed the child to Yolanda. One by one, he ferried the youngsters to his older sister while his faithful dog escorted him.

Several times he had to dodge floating debris — tree limbs, furniture, a refrigerator, and rubble from smashed houses. It finally became too hazardous for the dog to swim with him, so Peter ordered Duke to stay on the Wilsons' porch. The dog whined and barked in protest but obeyed his master.

Meanwhile, Tamara was trying to keep her mother, grandmother, and younger sister calm. Prissy was squatting on the stove, weeping. Crouched on top of the kitchen counter, Grandma clutched Peter's mother and said, "I guess this is the way we're going to die. We'll drown."

"I don't want to die like this, Momma," she wailed.

"You can't give up," Tamara said. "Everything is going to be all right. You'll see."

Peter waded into the kitchen and said, "Grandma, you're next."

"No, I can't do it," she objected. "I'll drown for sure. I'm too big and too scared. Save Prissy. Save your momma. Just leave me behind."

"You and Tamara take Prissy," their mother ordered. "Grandma and I will leave our lives in God's hands. Now go, Peter!"

"No way," he said. "Not without all of you."

The rushing water, which was now up to his neck, had ripped the front door off its hinges. He grabbed it and positioned it next to the kitchen counter. "Get on it, Grandma," he said.

"Oh, I'm afraid . . ."

"Just do it!" he commanded, surprising himself with the forcefulness of his voice. Shaking from fear, the 200-pound woman leaned over and belly flopped on the door, grasping it for dear life. Then holding it from the back end like a boogie board, Peter began kicking and maneuvered the door out the window and into the floodwater.

Grandma never stopped screaming until Peter brought her safely to the Wilsons'. But when he tried to swim back with the door, the fierce current ripped it out of his hands.

Stroking harder and harder, he couldn't understand why he wasn't making any progress. Something was holding him back. The rushing water slapped him in the face and then surged over his head. He struggled to get his nose above the surface as wave after wave slammed into him.

Prissy, who was clutching the side of the broken window, screamed, "Oh, no! Peter is going under! I can't see him! He's drowning!"

He finally realized that his shirt had become snagged on

a submerged tree limb. "Don't . . . *glub* . . . worry, Prissy . . . *glub* . . . I'm coming to get you!"

Taking a deep breath, he went underwater, took off his shirt, and freed himself from the limb. Then he swam to his shivering, panic-stricken sister.

"Let go of the windowsill and come into my arms," he told her.

"No . . . I can't . . . I'll drown!"

"Just wrap your arms around my neck. You have to let go. I'm getting tired of treading water."

"No, let me stay here!"

He climbed onto the windowsill. "Prissy, come with me."

She shook her head, her eyes wide with fright. Out of patience, Peter pried her fingers off the windowsill one at a time and pulled her into the water. His petrified sister screamed and squeezed her arms around his neck so hard he could barely breathe all the way to the Wilsons'.

Then he returned for his mother, who was gripping Tamara's hand as they stood on the kitchen table. "I don't think I can do this," his mother said. By now the water inside was over Peter's head and the house had tilted at a severe angle. "Momma, get down here and I'll guide you out, just like I have for all the others. This house is about to come apart."

"Oh, I don't know. . . ."

In his frustration, he leaped up, grabbed her by the hand, and yanked her into the water.

"What are you doing?" she gasped.

"Trying to save your life. You're coming with me."

Tamara jumped into the water, too. The three of them tied the sheet-rope around one another and floated toward the open window. Although his mother weighed three times as much as Peter, she clasped her arms around his back, and they, along with Tamara, floated to the Wilsons'.

When everyone was safe in the house, Grandma shouted, "You did it, Peter! You're our hero!"

"Oh, Mama, look!" wailed his mother. Everyone crowded around the window. The power of the storm surge had finally pushed Grandma's house off its foundation and shoved it into the side of the Wilsons' house. It took only minutes before her beloved home broke apart in a series of heartbreaking cracks and snaps. And just like that, all her worldly possessions spilled into the rushing water and were carried away forever.

"Oh, your house!" Peter's mother cried. "It's gone! You've lost everything!"

"No, not everything," said Grandma. "Just things. I still have all of you." Then her lip quivered and she broke down and sobbed.

The wind, although strong, had lessened considerably. The storm surge, however, was still rising and had reached the front door of the Wilsons'. *We might have to leave here, but where will we go?* Peter wondered. Then he spotted a small flat-bottom boat drifting aimlessly in the flood about 100 yards away. He jumped in the water — and so did Duke, who could no longer bear the thought of watching his young master swim alone. Peter reached the boat, climbed inside, and pulled his dog in with him. He started paddling with his hands but didn't get

anywhere. Spotting a broom on the porch of a nearby house, he jumped out, snatched it, then got back into the boat and used the broom as his paddle.

Trying to find help, Peter headed to a major intersection, which was now under at least 15 feet of water, but he saw no one. He returned to the Wilsons', where the rising water was now seeping in. "We need to leave this place," he announced.

"Where will we go now?" Grandma asked.

"The old apartment building," he replied. Peter was referring to an abandoned three-story structure that was a few doors down from the Wilsons'. Over the next half hour, he shuttled his relatives in the boat to the building where they huddled together on the top floor to wait out the storm. By mid-morning, the floodwaters had crested and the winds had weakened.

Peter and his family survived Hurricane Katrina — the most destructive storm in American history. It claimed more than sixteen hundred lives (with more than one thousand people unaccounted for) and caused an estimated seventy-five billion dollars in damage. The hurricane also left more than 1.5 million people homeless — a humanitarian crisis unseen before in the United States.

Katrina's ferocious winds and 30-foot-high storm surge killed about 100 people in the Biloxi area and destroyed or seriously damaged more than 60 percent of the city's homes and businesses. Historic mansions and magnificent multimillion-dollar casinos were trashed beyond recognition.

Like thousands of other citizens in Biloxi, Peter and his family were left without anything but their lives. Their homes

were destroyed or washed away along with virtually all their belongings. As survivors, they were forced to move into shelters and temporary housing. But they were still thankful that they had one another.

When they reunited with Jerome at a Biloxi shelter, Peter's mother put her arms around her sons and told Jerome, "I just thank God for Peter. We would not be here but for the grace of God and Peter's courage. He's our hero."

Jerome rubbed his brother's head and said, "Better than any comic-book superhero, huh, Peter?"